

Project: prevention

From anxiety to action: five ways to be more productive

When it comes to your to-do list, do you bury your head in the sand? Here's how to stop procrastinating and get stuff done

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▲ Rather than putting things off, break tasks down into manageable chunks. Photograph: Guille Faingold/Stocksy United

Humans are world-class at putting off the jobs they don't really want to do. It's a lesson we all learned the hard way over lockdown, when we never quite got round to using all that extra free time to learn a new language.

"Procrastination is extremely common - I think most people are probably procrastinating about something, whether they know it or not," says [productivity expert Karen Eyre-White](#).

If you're putting things off because of issues such as fear of failure or burnout, it might be time to look for expert help to examine the root of the problem. But if your to-do list is piling up simply because it looks a bit daunting and watching Netflix is more fun, these five tips should help kickstart you into long-overdue action.

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1 Break it down

Sometimes the sheer size of the task at hand makes us put it off. If the end is nowhere in sight, even getting started can feel exhausting.

"If you're not going to get a project done in one sitting, the solution is to break it down into manageable chunks," says Eyre-White. "For example, if you're writing a report, you might need to sketch out the content first. Breaking it down before getting started means it won't seem quite as overwhelming."

Once you've broken the task down, add individual steps to your to-do list. "You could just write 'review report' on your list, but if you write everything down, your brain will feel more willing to do each step," Eyre-White adds. "The more specific you can be, the better."

2 Take it 10 minutes at a time

Now you've split up your task into smaller chunks, trick your brain by setting bite-size time limits. Pretending you're only going to spend 10 minutes on a task might sound like a trick you'd pull on a toddler, but your brain really is that easily fooled.

"Sometimes our brains won't let us spend two hours on a task, because it's too scary - but 10 minutes feels manageable," says Eyre-White. "Tell yourself you'll spend five to 10 minutes getting everything ready to start the task - like opening up the document, and finding the emails you need. Then, one of two things will happen: either you'll carry on working once you've started, or you'll stop at 10 minutes. But even then, when you go back to the job it'll be easier, because you've got those little things sorted out."



3 Find your motivation

Each item on your to-do list is there to help you achieve an end goal, whether that's earning money or maintaining your health. Reminding yourself of the "why" can help you with the "how".

"Understanding why we're doing something is an important motivator," says Eyre-White. "Sometimes, particularly when it comes to boring tasks, we can lose that connection with what we actually care about: why is this task important, and why does it need to be done well? If you try to understand that it's a necessary part of something bigger, it can help you to get over the urge to procrastinate."

4 Tackle the hardest bit first

The adult equivalent of holding your nose and eating your greens - this is about getting the worst part over and done with.



▲ Make completing the task as pleasant as possible by making a cup of tea first, or putting music on. Photograph: Helen Rushbrook/Stocksy United

"It's a good idea to do the hardest thing you need to do first," says Eyre-White. "Once we've managed to do an unpleasant or difficult thing, it helps build momentum and makes us feel as though we can tackle anything."

"If every morning you're routinely going to your to-do list and doing that one thing you're avoiding, it becomes a habit, and can help you feel very productive. Often, these things don't take that much time - you just need to overcome the emotional weight associated with them."

5 Reward yourself

You might be too old for a gold star, but rewards can be a great motivator - whatever your age.

"Start by making the process of doing the task as pleasant as possible," Eyre-White advises. "The idea of being kind to ourselves while doing tasks we've been putting off can feel quite alien, but this is the ideal time to make yourself a lovely cup of tea, or put some music on - anything that makes the idea of doing the job feel more pleasant."

Then, once you're done, it's time to reward yourself. "Although, I'd advise you to save rewards for when you finish the really big tasks," Eyre-White warns. "If we do it too often, it doesn't feel like a reward any more."

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